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Human implantable "black-box" technologies need greater scrutiny

by Beverley Head

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Technological innovation which might allow implantable chips to act as human "black-boxes" needs careful analysis from technical, societal and ethical standpoints – and is one of the areas to be explored by an IEEE conference planned for Australia in 2010.

Organised by the IEEE's Society on Social Implicatons of Technology, the conference will explore the social implications of emerging technologies and invite innovators, lawyers, ethicists and policy makers to participate.

Dr Katina Michael, a senior lecturer at the University of Wollongong which will host the conference next June, is one of the conference chairs and now seeking submissions from would-be presenters.

"I'm looking for psychologists and sociologists as well. I think implants will become the black-box for individuals where data can be stored, analysed or tampered with."

While the technology already exists, Dr Michael is concerned too little attention has been paid to the implications of its widespread application. Already "There are trials of these things which have occurred with prisoners or Alzheimer's' patients, but there are massive implications here regarding cognitive awareness," which she believed were not being properly considered.

"There is a pressure now for innovators to get to market. They just want to patent and innovate, and create churn. It is all about dollars. We are all working at web-speed which does not allow for us to reflect before roll out," said Dr Michael.

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